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ASIATIC ART
An Introduction to Japanese Art
of the Ukiyo-e School

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An Introduction to Japanese Art of the Ukiyo-é School.

Prior to the seventeenth century the artists of Japan had drawn little, if any, of their inspiration from the phenomena of every-day life among the average people, --- phenomena with which each in his time must have been familiar, either as participant or as observer. Apart, indeed, from the type of exaggerated but clever and somewhat broad caricature originated during the latter part of the twelfth century by Toba Sōjō, any reference whatever, in painting, to the doings and surroundings of the Japanese themselves had been almost wholly confined to pictures executed by the followers of a single romantic school, known since the thirteenth century as the Tosa Academy.

The humorous style invented by Toba Sōjō did not, however, assume the proportions of a distinct school of painting. It persisted, rather, as an easy and effective method of expression for any one, --- with or without academic affiliations, --- who wished to relieve himself and amuse others by indulging in satire of a fairly obvious kind. The Tosas, on the other hand, --- as well as their lineal predecessors, the Takumas and Kasugas, --- were entirely serious persons, many of them deeply inspired, and all alike

devoted to the maintenance of the ancient and refined traditions of their Academy. In the beginning they contributed more especially, perhaps, to the enrichment of Buddhist art, but from the earliest times, too, they had found inspiration in subjects which were essentially Japanese. Thus the pomp and circumstance of the Imperial Court, the lives of great nobles, priests, poets and heroes of romance, the building and contents of some famous temple, --- all seem to have furnished suitable motives to these exponents of the Tosa School.

Very different, in this latter respect at least, was the point of view which found such vigorous expression in the early fifteenth century. Up to this time Tosa Romanticism had flourished so exceedingly as almost to obliterate the first impressions received many hundreds of years earlier from China; but already during the later decades of the fourteenth century the powerful influence of a revival of Chinese Idealism began to take effect on the religious, artistic and social activities of Japan. Chinese ideals, as exemplified in the paintings of T'ang, Sung and Yüan masters, were fostered throughout the fifteenth century by such Japanese artists as Josetsu, Shūbun, Sōtan and Sesshū, to whom Chinese subjects furnished practically their only sources of inspira-

tion, and about 1500 the movement partially culminated in the foundation of the great Kano Academy with Masanobu and his famous son, Motonobu, at its head.

It was nevertheless impossible that the vigorous popular life of Japan should be forever excluded from its place in Japanese art, and it is, therefore, hardly surprising to find evidences that, even in the late sixteenth century and among the Kanos themselves, the canons of Chinese taste were less rigidly enforced against all things Japanese. Still less surprising is it, however, that to a follower of the ancient Tosas, Iwasa Shoi, --- more commonly known as Matahei, --- should have fallen the lot of originating, early in the seventeenth century, a true Popular School of Art, founded on his brilliant pictures of life in the streets of Edo and in the far-famed Yoshiwara, among actors and courtesans, and among those, too, who found their happiness under the blossoming cherry trees. His paintings, now excessively rare, were called Ukiyo-é, --- "pictures of this fleeting world", --- and he had a number of immediate followers; but though his work was of inestimable value to the cause of popular art, bringing in its wake many notable

defections from the ranks of the Tosa and Kano Academies, one element of complete success was still lacking. A popular art had, indeed, been evolved, but it remained for Hishikawa Moronobu, a pattern designer, to put this art within the reach of every one by perfecting the crude methods of wood-block engraving already in use for the production of broadsides and printed picture-books. This important achievement in the history of Japanese art and in the practice of xylography probably took place early in the last quarter of the seventeenth century, and served to establish the Ukiyo-é School on a firm foundation. But although during the next two hundred years innumerable myriads of the now familiar color prints were published, many of their prolific designers nevertheless found time for the production of elaborate and carefully executed paintings, while other artists of the School never drew for the publishers at all. Others, again, devoted their talents to the carving of wood and ivory, or to the working of metals, for various useful and ornamental purposes; and in addition there was a steady output of designs for the use of lacquerers, weavers and pattern makers in general. It followed naturally enough that as all available materials be-

came for these men suitable media of expression, and as their product came to be ever more cheaply and rapidly supplied in response to increasing demands, so, too, were they impelled to employ every possible device of execution and to draw upon every possible source of inspiration. No subject was too sacred or too profane for their purposes. Buddhist divinities, Taoist immortals, saints, grave philosophers and heroes, the whole stock in trade of the aristocratic Tosas and of the Kano idealists, --- motives which Sesshū had approached on his knees and painted while he knelt, --- all these, together with the gay spectacle of modern life, the clever artists of the Popular School appropriated as their own; and into all they infused the pungent, facile spirit of the Ukiyo. So throughout the eighteenth century and until the middle of the nineteenth they worked and prospered, more or less despised, indeed, by the Academicians, but always popular with the mass of the people. However, after the death of Hokusai in 1849, the vigor of the movement flagged; the skill of the artisan, it is true, still survives, but the inspiration of the artist has vanished.

A review of all that the school accomplished

discloses much that may well excite sincere and lasting admiration. Facile draughtsmanship which juggled, seemingly at will, with almost every subtlety of line and composition; salient and often delicate perceptions of color, keen observation of many phases of life, and endless imaginative good humor in depicting them, --- such qualities, combined with tireless activity and great mechanical skill, have justly sufficed to give the Ukiyo-é an important place in Japanese art. On the other hand, it is clear that the movement as a whole was founded on an effort to glorify the more sordid elements of every-day life, and that the aesthetic achievement of Matahei, at the outset of the seventeenth century, was never surpassed, however much the scope of his teachings may have been amplified. In other words, the attempt to make art popular ended, as such attempts invariably do, in popularizing art; the consciousness of the Ukiyo was elevated comparatively little, while the ideals of art were dragged down to the spiritual level of the Yoshiwara.

"Truth is the skin of a Lie;
A lie is the bone of Truth;
To those who lose themselves,
Lies become Truths;
To those who attain Illumination,
Truths are but Lies.

O Yoshiwara! O Middle Path!
Good is the Yoshiwara for the Lost!
Good is the Yoshiwara for the Illumined!
The fidelity and fickleness of its dwellers
are deep as the sea, ---
Innumerable as the gay customers who, like
the sands, shift on its shore."*

Among the many forms in which this popularized art appeared, none was ever more thoroughly characteristic or more inevitably successful in its appeal than the color-print. During the fourteenth century, or perhaps even earlier, the use of outline prints as cheap substitutes for religious paintings, or, later, as illustrations for printed books, had found in Japan the same sort of recognition that it had long since received in China, the land of its origin; and until the rise of popular art in the latter part of the seventeenth century, it had hardly been regarded as other than a makeshift, --- at best a convenience. But to the pioneers of the Ukiyo-é School, matters of convenience, of time and money, were vitally important, and in his original conception of printing as an ultimate means of expression for pictorial art, Moronobu evolved an idea quite equal in prac-

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* After a poem by Yomono Akara, another name of Shokusanjin (Ōta Nampo), a noted poet of the late eighteenth century.

tical moment to the technical advance inaugurated by his first efforts as a printer. The stratum of life and consciousness from which these men drew their inspiration was also that to which the product of their labor must appeal, and thus they moved in a closed orbit, holding up an endless mirror, so to speak, in which their delighted public --- actor, courtesan, * geisha and man-about-town --- must be able to see at a glance the restless panorama of its own daily existence. Under such circumstances, the medium of communication between artist and patron was bound to include quantity, speed of production, cheapness, and a fair measure of uniformity as factors necessary to its success, --- not merely, however, because of the independent charm which these factors undoubtedly exerted over many minds, but because an art so ephemeral in motive on the one hand, required, on the other, a correspondingly ephem-

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* Actors, officially regarded in those days as the very dregs of humanity, and treated as outcasts, were known as kawara-mono or "river-bed creatures", from the places in which they were often obliged to live. Courtesans were known as keisei or "destroyers of citadels", in allusion to the Chinese saying that a debauched man injures only himself, whereas a debauched woman can endanger an Empire. Owing, however, to the popular movement in art and letters, both actors and courtesans became persons of importance and objects of enthusiastic flattery among their admirers.

eral mode of expression in order to maintain a working equilibrium. Thus it is hardly surprising that with all their cleverness, energy and wealth of opportunity as incentives, the artists of the Ukiyo-é School should have developed, in the course of little more than one hundred years, a technique enabling them to produce from wooden blocks, with great rapidity and at a trifling cost, multitudes of color prints which in their own way are masterpieces of facility, both in design and in execution.

It is with the climax of this movement --- toward the close of the eighteenth century --- that the present Special Exhibition deals, and it is hoped that from these works of Bunchō, Kiyonaga and Utamaro, selected from the Bigelow and Ross Collections, visitors to the Museum may be able to gather an adequate impression of the best that was achieved by the school of Japanese art, which even today, in the Western world at least, is more widely known and more thoroughly enjoyed than any other.

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